



Shantih Shantih Shantih: Western Discordance Resolved by East in Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) has become a gloomy representation of his religious faith, spiritual emptiness and devastation in the Western culture. The last chapter of the poem "What the Thunder Said" contains Hindu religious words like *datta*, *dhayadhvam*, *damyata* and *shantih*. This paper attempts to focus on how the Hindu religious ideas in the poem are working in the context of Eastern or Western domain. Hence this paper quests for the answer of the following question: is it a way of salvation that Eliot provides for the Waste land or a temporal escape to avoid the disruption? Do these words end up solving the discordance of the west? What is the position of Eliot as one of the empty men in the Waste land? The paper seeks for the authorial intention behind the universal dimension which rather favours a pessimistic understanding of the poem.

Keywords: Modernism, religion, orient, Hinduism, Buddhism

"We shall not cease from exploration
And in the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time." (Eliot, 3)

The above lines belong to Eliot's "Little Gidding", a poem of "Four Quartets" which like many of his poems upholding the ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning. Here Eliot postulates that the process of searching for something outside of ourselves indicating the truth within us, hidden beneath the layers of experience with the outside world. This subjective play of truth and meaning is the most crucial trend in Modernist poets which can be found in Eliot's celebrated poem *The Waste Land* (1922) where uncertainty and the process of ambiguity become rampant, and thus a continuous process of detachment as well as involvement of meaning is reflected throughout the poem. The poem bears a mechanized and corrupted Europe of the post-war world and intertextualized many non-European conceptions as part of Objective Correlative and thus carrying a universal dimension for the European readers. Eliot's use of various religious domains including Buddhism, Hinduism leads Geoffrey Bullough to comment that the poem "goes beyond a mere diagnosis of the spiritual distempers of the age, it is a lament of man's fallen nature, a prophesy to a promise." (Bullough, 22)

Eliot had once proclaimed himself as the "royalist in politics, classicist in literature and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (Eliot, 31). Eliot's religion has always been a confused and distracted one. He was avidly influenced by many religions likewise Hinduism, Buddhism,



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and Unitarianism and finally his quest for religion 'ends' in 1927 conversion to Christianity. *The Waste Land* ending with a reference to Upanishad and Hindu religious text like Bhagavat-Gita reflects Eliot's inclination towards Hinduism and Buddhism. Hence the readers of the poem brow and question the poet's conveyance of the Sanskrit words in a European poem. Words like 'Datta', 'Dayadhvam', 'Damyata' and 'Shantih' give certain difficulties in understanding the Western waste and disillusioned land through an Eastern lens. This additional inscription at the end leads to a more pessimistic understanding of the poem. Hence this paper attempts to decipher the way in which these Sanskrit words are being implemented in the poem and accordingly aims to question the Oriental resolution of the Western discordance which is perhaps being devised for an intentional pessimistic understanding of the poem, coming from a Modern poet's loss of religious belief and lack of spiritual faith.

Eliot's religion is often being designated as a "process of rejection and elimination". He was profoundly influenced by other religions like Buddhism that some critics designated him as a Buddhist. But Eliot himself was not perhaps prepared to give up his European or American identity:

"...my only hope of reality penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European; which for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do"(Eliot, 56)

Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects his reading of Bhagavat-Gita and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad along with his personal and religious dissatisfaction with the Western culture and mechanized civilization- "In *The Waste Land* Eliot presents a crisis or breakdown of civilisation, this has to be understood as first of all a crisis or breakdown in himself" (Jain, 146). Eliot borrowed about six words from Hindu religious dimension in the last section of the poem named "What the Thunder Said"- *Ganga*, *Himavant*, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* and *Shantih*. These derivative words remain untranslated in the poem causing an inadequacy of meaning for the European readers. By not translating them Eliot might be suggesting his readers to recognise the essential spiritual quality that these words are bearing with. Hence this paper follows these words' contribution in the critical understanding of the poem.

The words *Ganga* and *Himavant* do not trouble a reader much as they are understandable with the progress and seemingly motivation of the poem. *Ganga* is a religious and mythical source of water in India. Here *Ganga* is sunken, making a desert dried with the absence of liveliness and mobility. The cloud over Himalaya is impregnated with water, but unable to shower down on earth signifying the inability to release and procreate.

Likewise in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, there is a triple utterance of DA, which suggests *Damyata*, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*. The meaning of *Damyata* is to control, *Datta* means to give and *Dayadhvam* means to sympathize which is a moral instruction to the God, man, and demon by Lord Prajapati to lead a meaningful life. These words are immensely fundamental to live a meaningful life are reversed in the poem as "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata", placing man in the first position before Demon and God. Eliot's placing of man in the first position is emphasizing man's importance in the world, governed by a "heap of broken images" (Eliot, 4). The words "Da Da Da" which are absolutely meaningful to Lord Prajapati's disciples



create a concrete meaning to a European reader without any Upanishadic or spiritual essence attached to it. Being an American or a European Eliot was not able to 'surrender' him completely to other religions- "the awful daring of a moment's surrender". To surrender is to gain an Oriental perception that Eliot was perhaps not prepared for. Hence it becomes ironic when Eliot offers an Oriental resolution in the end whereas he himself did not find any resolution there. The cycle of this illusion continues to reiterate throughout the poem, which reminds us of Buddhism's religious wheel of *Karma*- "life-in-death" and "death-in-life".

After questing for *Datta Dayadhvam Damyata*, we immediately encounter with the words *Shantih Shantih Shantih* which take us again to the grand Brihadaranyaka Upanishadic ending *Om Shantih Shantih Shantih*. This intertextualized concept of the Sanskrit words simply denotes Eliot's inability to find spiritual relief within the European domain. Hence he looked beyond the European tradition to find a resolution for the spiritually paralyzed people of the West. But to the European readers, these words would mean only a conception of 'peace'. To them, these are not symbols, rather mere codes which replace "Peace that passeth understanding". Hence the question is why did Eliot go into the trouble of dragging those Sanskrit words in the poem? What difference does it make from the faith, hope, and charity? Herein comes the impersonal Eliot's poetic self which is layered beneath the rhetorical and mystical codes of the poem. Hence, on the one hand, we have a world filled with sterility, boredom, neurosis, meaninglessness and on the other hand, we are faced with a sense of poetic ambiguity, and personal faithlessness. Thus the poem does not give a permanent state for the readers to be relied on:

"I am one whom the sense of void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting". (Eliot, 433)

The 'incomprehensible' Sanskrit codes invoke Eliot's 'immediate' compilation and they have become a termination of the poem if not necessarily an ending offered by a modern poet. As Moody suggests in his book *On Poetry and Poets* that *Shantih* is a "moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable".

When Prajapati in the religious text gives his moral principles of *Damayata*, *Datta*, *Dayadhvam* to God, Man and Demon, he responds their answer with *Om* signifying that they have understood the morals. Here the intentional omission of *Om* which precedes *Shantih Shantih Shantih* is obvious to the readers. This half-uttered Shanti-mantra reminds us of *The Hollow Men*:

"For Thine is
Love is
For Thine is the" (Eliot, 3)

Om provides immense value to an Indian and is the quintessential source of all order and harmony in life, according to Upanishad. The spiritually diverted personas of the Wasteland can neither utter the prayer fully nor can they meditate on *Om* to find divine accomplishment. This utter failure is ironized with the idealization of the East as the representative of the religious fulfillment that the West lacks.



The replacement of Biblical 'Peace' with *Shantih* takes the European readers back to their religious text- The Bible. Or on a positive note, this may be suggestive of Eliot's connotation that the Europeans need to look back at their injunction, subjectivity and moral instructions to release themselves from their dilemmas and to gain salvation.

Moreover, the discordance of the West and the supposed solution provided by the East is the *prima facie* of the last chapter "What the Thunder Said" which questions not only the poem's universal dimension but Eliot's authorial intention. This authorial interpretation of Eliot left the documentation behind as such:

"An individual European may not believe that the Christian faith is true...If Asia were converted to Christianity tomorrow, it would not thereby become a part of Europe...if Christianity goes, the whole culture goes...then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put one new culture readymade."(Eliot, 200)

There was no doubt that Eliot's uncertainty about religion follows even after his 1927 conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. Hence Eliot's confusion lies not in his faithlessness rather he was confused at having a stable religious belief and be walled within its predetermined conception. The very idea of Eliot's spiritual salvation is therefore in question. The concerned topic of this paper *Shantih Shantih Shantih* seems to bear a different meaning if judged from Buddhists' point of view. Buddhism's notion of *Nirvana* (Salvation) is not an escape to another world of perfect peace from the world of moral circumstances, rather *Nirvana* is subjective and self-reflective. It is an epistemological self-quest rather than universal self-adjustment or looking outside of one's own cultural and religious domain. Eliot's idea here seems to be corresponding with the Buddhist idea of resolution which is to be free from the prejudices, assassinated convention, and predetermined doctrines. Hence a transgressive meaning can be drawn of *Shantih* where there is a quest for absolute self-reality rather than dwelling on the different cultures of an alien religion. As Eliot says about his Asian and Christian readers:

"For both kinds of reader, it is salutary to learn that the Truth...is not wholly confined to their religion...it was only in relation to his own religion that the insights of any one of these men had its significance to him, and what they can only reveal its meaning to the reader who has his own religion of dogma and doctrines in which he believes." (Nobel award peace)

Moreover, the poem suggests multi-dimensional perspectives of interpretation and layers of meaning which result in a continuous process of involvement and detachment. Having inscribed the Hindu religious words in the poem Eliot not only showed his wide wisdom and erudition but also left a space for the reader to question and to deconstruct the intended meaning as well. Hence this paper so far has discussed Eliot's 'famous' ending to the poem, which on the one hand may influence the readers with a universal dimension but on the other hand, the discussed counterpoints make a reader critically aware of the pessimistic salvation of the poem where *Hieronymo* can be mad again.



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